

"OLD HICKORY."

JAMES PARTON'S BIOGRAPHY OF JACKSON.

GREAT COMMANDERS: GENERAL JACKSON. By James Parton. 12mo, pp. 332. D. Appleton & Co.

A special interest attaches to Mr. Parton's life of General Jackson, for it was the last work he did before his death. It is, moreover, a very creditable piece of biography, and if it presents the purely military side of Jackson's career at such length and in such high relief as to obscure the political side of his life, the professional instinct of the trained bookmaker no doubt counts for something in the result. It is, of course, not possible for any biographer of General Jackson to ignore or to belittle the many grim and unamiable traits of his character, or to conceal the obvious fact that he was capable of committing the most odious and the most lawless actions under the stimulus of a high temper and strong will. It is in fact very apparent that no man ever was less fitted by nature or education to be a constitutional ruler of a free country. At the time he flourished, however, American government had not yet become familiar in its working to the nation, and there were so many disturbing influences within and without that men instinctively reached out for leaders of positive strength and unquestioned mastery, and cared little for minor considerations.

Jackson's Southern training and his personal experience in that wild country had not taught him much of the amenities of polished life, but had developed in him a readiness, a shrewdness, a gift of handling men in emergencies, which shows that he is justly entitled to rank among great commanders. In this volume, which is written characteristically with an eye to the picturesque, Mr. Parton has very adroitly proportioned his various subjects. The Indian warfare, which really gave Jackson all the military practice he ever had before he was called upon to confront famous European troops and commanders—the men of the Peninsular campaigns and the officers who had led them—could not have really taught Jackson much. The aptitude was in him. He was in some essential respects a born captain; and that alone can explain his great success at New-Orleans.

To this crowning achievement of his life his biography leads up cleverly, and upon it he lavishes all his descriptive art. The result is a most stirring, and for the most part quite intelligible, account of that momentous series of engagements; though even Mr. Parton finds it at times impossible to do justice to the conditions under which much of the fighting was done. When, for example, it was for hours together, so dark that the contending parties could only be guided by the flashes of the guns, it must clearly have been quite impossible for either commanders or troops on either side to know with any approach to precision what was taking place. All that was rendered certain eventually was that the British troops met an awful slaughter, that they were incapable of withstanding the deadly fire directed against them in flank and front; that the marksmanship of the Americans produced an unprecedented mortality among the enemy's officers.

It might, indeed, be questioned whether the slaughter of officers in any comparatively modern battle equals that of New-Orleans. The redoubts were plied of by the score in every direction, and when the end approached every general officer had been killed or disabled. Of course the external circumstances had much to do with the general result. The approaches to the city, the vicinity of the river, the shallowness of the soil—each and all played their part in promoting the defence and baffling the assault. No doubt has ever been entertained of the capacity of Pakenham to be the gallantry of his army. The latter was by general acknowledgement the very flower of that splendid body of troops which had fought with almost constant victory over half Europe. Yet here at New-Orleans they were pitted against a hasty levy of raw recruits, and were wholly disconcerted.

To General Jackson above all belongs the glory of this great achievement, for perhaps no other man could have maintained the resolution and firmness of so motley a host, and certainly few men could have risen to a great emergency with more calmness and judgment. It was one of the best proofs of his innate military genius that danger always cooled and concentrated his faculties. There is no instance of his having ever been flustered or confused. The harder the problem the more clearly he saw how to solve it; and he had the rare and invaluable gift of imparting to those about him the hope and resolution which buoyed him up at the most difficult moments. In battle the man was thoroughly at home. With a body so frail, so diseased, so shattered by his trials, that it seemed half the time on the verge of dissolution, he joined a spirit so indomitable that it fairly and literally defied physical weakness, and on every appeal lifted its owner to the height of perfect fitness for the work in hand. There is a reminder of Nelson at times in Jackson's gallant and always successful wrestlings with the weakness of the flesh; and this it was which made him a great commander.

The glory and fame of New-Orleans do not fade even under the strong light thrown by the fierce fighting of the Rebellion. No more recent series of engagements can be named which had results more momentous, or in which all the probabilities seem so reversed. It is a feat of arms always to be marvelled at, and let us add, never likely to be better or more spiritedly recounted than in the pages before us. Mr. Parton has done full justice to his subject, and, after descending from the excitement of those days, he finds the affairs of the National Administration somewhat irksome, one can sympathize with him. As President of the United States, General Jackson was destined to expose his weakest points. He never could have been an ideal constitutional ruler, and he made no effort to be so. All his tendencies were arbitrary and sometimes even despotic. He did greatest and lasting harm in his unshod and unprincipled fight with the United States Bank; but to his last day he failed to realize the truth. In this respect his present biographer has certainly done him a little more than strict justice; but the life as a whole is strong, well compacted, and throws into relief its hero's main characteristics with decided skill and success.

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